

# Handout

## Introduction

Hidden Harm (Home Office 2003) estimates that there are between 250,000 and 350,000 children of problem drug users in the UK. The report also showed that the parents with the most serious drug problems and the most chaotic lives are the least likely to be living with their children. In this handout, we look at the impact on children of parental problem drug use in more detail. This has been a particularly neglected area for research, with most of the limited number of studies being conducted in the US and only a handful in the UK. Nevertheless, these and other work in the fields of alcohol misuse and mental health enable some important conclusions to be drawn.

Problem drug use has serious negative consequences of a physical, psychological, social and interpersonal, financial or legal nature for users and those around them. Several features of problem drug use in the UK are of particular importance for their potential impact on children. Crises can occur at any time, for example due to overdose or injecting-related infection, or due to arrest and imprisonment or eviction.

**First**, most problem drug users use several drugs (polydrug use). Typical combinations are heroin and benzodiazepines or heroin and cocaine but many others may be used, depending on their availability. The vast majority of problem drug users smoke tobacco and many are heavy users of alcohol or cannabis. Taking drugs in combination greatly increases the unpredictability of their effects on the user.

**Second**, many problem drug users inject drugs, particularly heroin, for maximum effect and value for money. This puts them at greater risk of overdose, leading to unconsciousness and the risk of death, and infection with blood-borne viruses such as HIV and hepatitis B and C and other micro-organisms.

**Third**, many live in disadvantaged communities in conditions of poverty and social exclusion. Many have had difficult childhoods, fared badly at school or have significant mental health problems. Their drug use may thus be only one of several factors that may affect their capacity as parents. Where drug use has become heavy and dependency has developed, life for the user and those around them is often chaotic and unpredictable.

Of equal importance are the longer-term effects of drug taking over months or years for physical health, for example chronic illness due to HIV or hepatitis C infection, and for employability, income and relationships. The consequences of problem drug use for users themselves are thus extremely wide-ranging and variable. What about the impact on their children?

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Adults who misuse substances

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## Growth and development

In order to understand the potential impact of parental drug use on the child, the complexity of the process of growth and development needs to be recognised. This depends on many interacting biological and social factors that can be grouped under three headings:

- conception and pregnancy,
- parenting; and
- the wider family and environment.

## Common features of problem drug use

### Physical

major injecting-related problems, for example abscesses, blood-borne virus infections, overdose, accidental and non-accidental injury.

### Psychological

priorities dominated by drugs  
drug ingestion usually a daily event and an essential requirement for everyday functioning  
unpredictable and irritable behaviour during withdrawals  
chronic anxiety, sleep disorders, depression, suicidal behaviour  
post-traumatic stress disorder  
serious memory lapses.

### Social and interpersonal

family break-up  
loss of employment  
unreliability  
chronic or intermittent poverty  
rejection by former friends and community  
victim or perpetrator of physical, psychological or sexual abuse  
eviction and homelessness  
need to engage in property, crime, fraud, drug dealing or prostitution to pay for drugs  
association with other persistent offenders.

### Financial

constant requirement to find large sums of money to pay for drugs  
substantial debts  
inability to pay for basic necessities.

### Legal

arrest and imprisonment  
outstanding warrants and fines  
probationary orders.

## Childhood Neglect: Improving Outcomes for Children

How a baby develops during pregnancy is affected by a number of factors, of which the most important are:

- genetic endowment
- the mother's general health and nutritional status
- foetal nutrition during pregnancy
- exposure to drugs and other toxins
- exposure to infection
- exposure to external trauma.

Parenting embraces a wide range of activities that directly or indirectly affect the wellbeing of the child. The most important of these are:

- basic care
- ensuring safety
- emotional warmth
- stimulation
- guidance and boundaries
- stability.

There are also many aspects of the wider family and environment, which can influence children's experiences in one way or another. These include:

- family history and functioning
- the extended family
- housing
- employment
- income
- family's social integration
- community resources.

The way the child develops thus depends on a wide range of influences. How these affect the child can be considered under four headings or dimensions. These are:

- health
- education
- emotional and behavioural development
- identity
- family and social relationships
- social presentation
- self-care skills.

**A child's needs and capabilities change over time, as do the potentially harmful experiences to which he or she is exposed and the consequent harm. Factors that might help to protect the child may also change over time.**